DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 488 RC 023 771

AUTHOR	Strand, Joyce A.; Peacock, Thomas D.
TITLE	Nurturing Resilience and School Success in American Indian and Alaska Native Students. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-02-11
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0027
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348. Tel: 800-624-9120 (Toll Free). For full text: http://www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc02-11.pdf.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Adolescent Development; Adolescents; American Indian Education; *American Indian Students; *Cultural Influences; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Influence; Nonformal Education; *Resilience (Personality); Student School Relationship; *Well Being
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest examines recent literature on factors related to resilience, well-being, and school success for American Indian and Alaska Native students. The characteristics of resilient Native youth are discussed, including the ability to bounce back from adversity, and protective factors that enable high-risk resilient children to avoid negative outcomes. Traditional Native ways of fostering resilience focused on developmental areas related to spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical well-being. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health revealed connections within family, community, and school that foster resilience. Although there are tribal differences in traditional Native ways, this digest focuses on some commonalities that exist in shared core values, beliefs, and behaviors. The findings of one recent study are highlighted, revealing what Native youth believe parents, teachers, and schools can do to foster resilience. Additional studies that make connections between resilience and Native spirituality and biculturalism are briefly reviewed. (Contains 18 references.) (SV)

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EDO-RC-02-11

December 2002

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Nurturing Resilience and School Success in American Indian and Alaska Native Students

Joyce A. Strand and Thomas D. Peacock

This Digest examines recent literature on factors related to resilience, well-being, and school success for American Indian and Alaska Native students. The characteristics of resilient Native youth; traditional Native ways of fostering resilience; and connections within family, community, and school that foster resilience are considered. Although there are tribal differences in traditional Native ways among the 554 Native American (U.S.) tribes, the focus here is on some commonalities that exist in "shared core values, beliefs, and behaviors" (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997, p. 1). The authors review findings of a recent study on what Native youth believe parents, teachers, and schools can do to foster resilience. Additional studies that make connections between resilience and Native spirituality and biculturalism are briefly reviewed.

Resilience

Resilience is a term used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity (Benard, 1995). Persons who are resilient have the capacity to withstand, overcome, or recover from serious threat (Masten, 2001). Simply put, resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity.

As it relates to American Indian and Alaska Native youth, resilience is exemplified by certain qualities possessed by these children and youth who, though subjected to undue stress and adversity, do not give way to school failure, substance abuse, mental health problems, or juvenile delinquency (Peacock, 2002). These youth benefit from *protective factors* provided through family (including extended tribal family who share the responsibility of child care), schools, and the community. These protective factors enable children to alter or reverse negative outcomes that might have been predicted for them, fostering instead the long-term development of resilience (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997; Werner-Smith & Brewer, 1996).

Ways Traditional Native Cultures Fostered Resilience

The Indigenous people of North America were nearly obliterated by disease, war, and genocide during the period of European colonialism. Their numbers were reduced from an estimated 10 million to fewer than a million people (Zinn, 2000). Many of the survivors and their descendants struggled to resist federal efforts to terminate their special status and limited sovereignty. They endured the boarding school era, during which the federal government overtly worked to eradicate tribal languages and culture and "Americanize" Native young people by removing them from elders, family, and community. American Indians and Alaska Natives also experienced grinding poverty and the social ills that accompany it.

Through all this adversity, they survived with much of their traditional cultures still intact. One explanation for their survival is that fostering resilience in young people is not a new concept for Native people. HeavyRunner and Morris (1997) explain that, traditionally, resilience has been cultivated by focusing on four developmental areas:

1. *spirituality*—living according to the belief in the interrelatedness of all things
2. *mental well-being*—having clear thoughts
3. *emotional well-being*—balancing all emotions
4. *physical well-being*—attending to the physical self

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) described Native ways of building self-esteem as fostering resilience in young people. In traditional cultures, there were four bases of self-esteem:

1. *Belonging*. From the time they were born, children were looked after by caring adults. Everyone in the community treated others as related, so children developed a sense of respect and concern for others and experienced a minimum of friction. All of this fostered good will.
2. *Mastery*. American Indian and Alaska Native families told stories, provided nurture, and acted as role models to foster balance in spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical competence.
3. *Independence*. Many traditional Native cultures placed a high value on individual freedom, and young people were given training in self-management. Young people were never offered rewards for doing well. Practicing appropriate self-management was seen as the reward in itself.
4. *Generosity*. Giving to others and giving back to the community were fundamental core values in many Native cultures, where adults stressed generosity and unselfishness to young people.

Connections That Foster Adolescent Well-Being

Today, a common misconception about young people is that their race, ethnicity, family structure, or economic status are the major factors affecting their success or failure in school and, ultimately, in life. This misconception can lead some educators and others to view Native youth as coming from such deficient circumstances that they cannot be expected to succeed.

However, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (NLSAH), which analyzed a nationally representative sample of more than 90,000 young people of all ethnicities, came to different conclusions. The NLSAH explored the social settings of adolescent lives, the ways in which youth connect with their social worlds, and the influence of these settings and connections on health and behavior. The study produced insights into the role of (1) families, (2) schools, and (3) the personal characteristics of individual youth in protecting adolescents from harm (Blum & Rinehart, 1997). The findings may influence our understanding of adolescent resilience. Some of the factors that protect youth from engaging in risky behaviors and harmful health practices may also help them develop the ability to bounce back when they encounter adversity.

The importance of family. The NLSAH reported that healthy youth who avoided risky behavior felt strongly connected with their families. They felt they were understood, loved, wanted, and paid attention to by family members. They did not have access at home to guns, cigarettes, alcohol, or illegal drugs. None of their family members had attempted or committed suicide in the preceding year. Their parents disapproved of them having intercourse and using contraception at an early age and had high expectations for high school and college completion (Blum & Rinehart, 1997).

School connections. The NLSAH also found school-related factors in adolescent health and avoidance of harmful behaviors. Youth tended to do well when they

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- felt teachers at their school treated students fairly
- felt close to people at school
- got along with teachers and other students
- felt their fellow students were not prejudiced

The schools, which were of several different types (comprehensive public, magnet, or parochial schools), had high daily attendance, a strong parent-teacher organization, low drop-out rates, a high percentage of teachers with master's-level degrees or higher, and a high percentage of college bound students (Blum & Rinehart, 1997; Resnick et al., 1997).

Individual factors. Adolescents' well-being was affected by whether they believed they had good qualities, liked themselves, and felt loved and wanted (Resnick et al., 1997). Practices of spirituality, religion, and prayer were important. Probably because of the way society treats homosexuals, youth who had same-sex attraction tended to be more at risk. Students who didn't perceive a risk of their own untimely death, those who didn't work too many hours per week after school or on weekends, and those who physically looked their age (neither appearing too young nor too old for their age) tended to experience lower levels of distress and engaged less frequently in risky behaviors. The same was true of students who kept up their grades in the basic subjects and avoided repeating a grade level.

Factors That Foster Resilience in Native Youth

The family, school, and individual factors identified in the NLSAH study as promoting adolescent well-being have parallels in a recent study by Bergstrom, Cleary, and Peacock (2003) involving in-depth interviews with 120 Native students from across the United States and Canada. This study identified connections to parents, communities, teachers, and schools as major contributors to the resilience of Native youth. But students in this study identified another important factor: They reported that being well grounded and connected to their tribal culture was a big reason they stayed in school. The students in the study who were doing well (often after experiencing serious adversity) shared three positive characteristics in particular: good self-concept, a strong sense of direction, and tenacity. Feeling good about their tribal culture was a consistent theme among these students, who talked about their ability to feel comfortable living in both worlds (the Native community and mainstream schools); participation in cultural activities; strong positive feelings of belonging to a Native community and family; appreciation of the influences of elders, grandparents, and parents; and participation in a school curriculum that included Native history, language, and culture.

Other studies. Other recent research has identified spiritual and cultural factors as important in fostering Native student resilience that leads to school success.

Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, and LaFromboise (2001) found in interviews with 196 American Indian children in grades 5-8 that the degree to which children were embedded in traditional culture positively affected their school performance. According to its authors, this study provided empirical evidence that "enculturation is a resiliency factor in the development of [American Indian] children" (p. 577).

Graham (2001) investigated the role of spirituality in promoting resilience, which, in turn, supported school-based competence. Using a sample of 56 Native students identified by their principal as being both high-risk and resilient, she found that spirituality reported by adolescent students was related to competence in the school context.

Using a retrospective qualitative study design, Evans (1997) interviewed 26 individuals of various ages who had successfully met the challenges and adversities of living on the Great Basin Indian reservation. Study participants said they strived throughout their lives to follow the "right path," a process made easier through the support of others, a belief in God or the Creator, and self-caring.

A study of 117 American Indian adults living in San Diego, which classified participants according to their cultural identities, found that individuals classified as *bicultural* were least likely to suffer depression. This group was followed by the *assimilating*, *traditional*, and *marginal* groups (Byron, 1997). Other qualitative studies, each focused on a small sample, produced findings showing similar links between spirituality and/or enculturation and wellness and/or resilience (Klausen, 1996; Montgomery, Miville, Winterrowd, Jeffries, & Baysden, 2000; Ness, 2001).

Conclusions

A growing collection of studies is beginning to shed light on what qualities make for resilience in American Indian and Alaska Native children and youth, and on what factors are necessary to develop those qualities. However, even taken together, current research on these issues remains more suggestive than definitive, and thus they remain a fruitful and necessary area of inquiry (Trimble & Beauvais, 2001).

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0027. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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